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The United Colours of Etiquette: Interculturally in the Higher Education Classroom

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To Be or Not to Be ... Culturally Prescriptive

Is it the ESL (English as a Second Language) lecturer's responsibility, or, indeed, any lecturer's responsibility, to ensure that students not only learn correct linguistic forms but also that they do not misjudge cultural appropriateness? To assume such a role in a highly diverse, multicultural classroom setting may make one feel as though one is taking arms against a sea of troubles. Researchers such as González et al. (2001) and Fitzgerald (2003) see 'communication appropriate to the situational context' (Fitzgerald: 210) as the ultimate goal in intercultural interactions and highlight the need for learners of English as a foreign or second language to try to achieve conceptual learning (or learning from examples, first identified as 'concept attainment' by Bruner et al. 1956: 233). The hope is that they will come to understand the social and cultural conventions inherent in the Native Speaker community. But as with most aspirational tasks, this one is easier said than done. In this chapter we investigate through classroom research and reflective practice, key aspects of the role of lecturers in teaching learners how to communicate in a culturally appropriate manner in a multicultural classroom setting.

Our own positions have us teaching in a higher education setting in a School of Languages in Dublin in which the lecturers come from many different countries. Most of our German lecturers are from Germany; some of our Spanish lecturers are from Spain; almost all of our French

lecturers are from France; and our English lecturers are from the United States, the Netherlands and both sides of the Irish border. We also have lecturers from a number of other countries which include Italy, Sweden and La Réunion. Whenever we have agitated differences of opinions or ideas, whether in meetings or in the staff room, someone inevitably declares the disagreement a 'culture clash', even though most of us have been living in Ireland for many years. In our line of work, shouting 'culture clash' is often a humorously diplomatic way to build a temporary bridge over troubled waters. And in a crunch, sometimes our clashes are even good-naturedly attributed to our perceived cultural stereotypes, as in, 'they've been gesticulating over those new course proposal amendments all morning. But what do you expect? They're Spanish.'

In our own classrooms, we find we are quick to put disagreements and misunderstandings down to 'culture clashes' as well. Our students of English come from many different countries and, as they have enrolled on our degree in International Business and Languages both to improve their competence in the English language and to study it in various contexts – rhetorical, historical, literary, commercial – classroom practice is highly oral, highly discussion oriented. Predictably, of course, disagreements ensue. And since disagreement can be the lifeblood of discussion, disagreements are not always unwelcome. But when they become heated, we sometimes need to extinguish them fast and reflect on them later. 'Was that a culture clash?' we wonder. 'Or was it a run of the mill personality clash?' And when we do find ourselves in the midst of a culture clash, how can we avoid a similar occurrence in the future so as to prevent the hurtful expression of sentiment? We would like, in other words, for the 'clash' to occur in such a way that learning ensues, but hurt feelings do not.

When so many of us, especially in urban-based education sectors, now come from complex backgrounds, rich with hybrid and liminal identities, culture clashes are likely to be extremely slippery affairs. While they are sometimes bare and brash, loud and clear, they are at other times nearly too subtle to detect. Teachers and lecturers who spend much of their working day inside classrooms with students from dissimilar backgrounds may be, on the one hand, too quick to attribute in-class tension to cultural conflict because it presents an easy scapegoat. Or, on the other hand, they may be

too slow to isolate culture as the culprit because they do not wish to be reductive, essentialist or prone to stereotyping. Perhaps those of us who have multicultural backgrounds ourselves are especially loath to stereotype. While it is one thing to say in a good-natured, colleague-to-colleague way, 'you Spanish are always so excitable', or 'we must remember to let the French lecturers order the wine for next year's Christmas party', it is pedagogically inappropriate and dismissive to conclude that one's Chinese students are so quiet in the classroom because it is not 'in their nature' to question the teacher, and then leave it at that. That would be Orientalism at its most offensive.

This is not to deny that we must be ever conscious that learning styles have been conditioned by history and place, just as personality traits may be, at least in part, by-products of nation and region. As Kolb noted: '... stable and enduring patterns of human individuality arise from consistent patterns of transaction between the individual and his or her environment ...' (1984: 63–64). And given that our student cohort is ethnically and nationally diverse, as lecturers, the authors of this paper are of the view that we must be ever ready to negotiate difference, even when we are not entirely sure of its nature, its dimensions, or its origins.

Thankfully, it would seem that excavating the cultural rationale underlying each and every behaviour is not, in any case, a necessary attribute of good pedagogy. Indeed Guest convincingly suggests that an 'over-simplification' of certain cultural idiosyncrasies may merely amount to 'caricatures', rather than providing a profound insight into any given culture. He further feels that a contrastive analysis may promote a 'polarizing mentality', which will only reinforce cultural stereotyping by juxtaposing one culture with another in a static manner (2002: 155).

So perhaps drawing contrasts and comparisons (which have to remain tenuous at best) is not altogether helpful either, as the attempt to draw conclusions from them might well lead a lecturer to make strategic teaching decisions based on cultural generalizations rather than on individual student personalities. And to complicate matters further, in many settings (such as our own) two acculturation processes are at play: one involves gaining familiarity with the culture of the community of the target language (L2); the other involves adapting to the mixed group-culture of

fellow classmates. The terrain can be ridden with what Archer calls 'culture bumps' (1986: 170): we expect a certain type of behaviour and we experience something completely different.

But even with raised consciousness and the best of intentions, should we as teachers 'teach' our culturally diverse students where they go 'wrong' in their culturally underpinned ways of communicating? Opinion is divided. Brick, for instance, gives a warning to teachers about alerting their students to certain cultural contexts. She offers the example of Chinese students who might innocently ask the age of their new teachers. Their teachers may then explain that asking for a teacher's age is not appropriate behaviour in most Western societies, thus keeping their students from getting into embarrassing situations. Brick feels that while it is an admirable attempt on the part of teachers to try to sensitize their language learners to the new culture, they may 'effectively leave their students with nothing to say. In other words, teachers tend to teach what not to say, but not what to say' (1996: 3).

With this important caveat in mind, our own instincts tell us that it is indeed fitting and right to provide linguistic signposts to help students navigate these inevitable culture bumps and thus achieve more rewarding interaction and communication. We have many times, for instance, reassured our incoming students who, again, come from disparate backgrounds, that in Ireland, addressing one's lecturers by their first names is entirely acceptable. Some of our students, especially those from developing nations, are thoroughly unnerved by this level of familiarity. Others – mainly our Europeans – find it surprising, but quickly adapt. But we have come to see it as a part of our instructor-remit to inform them in no uncertain terms that their lecturers are not their new friends. They are not to be text-messaged for information or invited to parties. They are to be addressed by their first names simply because we are all, each of us, adults in an autonomous learning environment, in itself a fashionable concept unique to the culture of modern-day third level education and one that requires sensitive initiation for many of our Institute's students, both Irish and non-Irish alike.

But not only our instincts as experienced lecturers tell us that it is fitting and right for us to help our students navigate culture bumps; our

students tell us so as well. In 2009, we conducted a survey with recently graduated students and asked, specifically, do you feel it is the role of your language lecturers to teach socially acceptable behaviour in the target language and culture? 75 per cent strongly agreed that it was within the role of the lecturer to teach socially acceptable behaviour, 12.5 per cent agreed and 12.5 per cent remained undecided. When asked if they felt that it was within the remit of their language lecturers to prevent them from making culturally induced 'mistakes', 19 per cent strongly agreed, 50 per cent agreed, 19 per cent were undecided and 12 per cent disagreed.

Such findings suggest that, in general, third level students in a mixed cultural setting feel positive about receiving socio-cultural navigation tools from their lecturers. They do not worry about the arbitrary nature of cultural conventions; nor do they express any reservations about what many of us in education might consider a kind of Pygmalion effect whereby lecturers (Professor Higgins) create learners (Eliza Doolittles) in their own image, or to their own desires, or to the desires of the target culture (see the play *Pygmalion* by G. B. Shaw). On the contrary, our students in Dublin welcome any advice we can offer them about how to 'fit in' with the host culture.

And so as Brick (above) suggests, we *do*, sometimes, teach our students 'what to say' (1996: 3). And we do so even though the level of English of our students is quite advanced. We do not worry about real or imagined accusations of cultural imperialism but rather that our students will experience isolation if we do not help them to become culturally astute at choosing their words and utterances carefully in the host environment.

Fostering Collegial Classroom Interaction

A useful and succinct description of culture based on Bodley's categories would be that it is shared, learned, symbolic, and adaptive (Bodley: 1994). Without wishing to overstate the obvious, we can say that culture

involves ways of behaving, perceiving, evaluating, and acting and, of course, it evolves. When we are working in an intercultural environment, we are *forming* a kind of culture because, as we interact over time, we evolve modes of behaviour and discourse that are indeed shared, learned, symbolic and adaptive. We become – in our case – part of a Culture of International Learners. Along with our students, we find ways to mediate difference and to communicate. And we often find that our actual cultural differences are not as great as our perceived differences. It is the unknown that causes problems. Since many of our students have had little or no contact with the countries of their classmates, they cannot know just *how* different were the towns and cities from which they came, nor how different were their secondary schools, their housing arrangements, their family structures, their sexual mores and so on. Until they – until we – get to know each other, we can only work from hearsay, presupposition and stereotype. After we have worked together for a time, we begin to know each other as individuals and we cease to rely on stereotype or presupposition, which, as argued above, have their polarizing limitations.

While it is possible for us to teach advanced English for use in international communication (i.e. we can teach increasingly sophisticated language to enable broad functioning in the country and cultures of the target language), given the heterogeneity it is more difficult for us to decide what ‘expressive forms’ such as idioms, expressions, euphemisms and slang are recommendable for culturally varied students in a multicultural classroom. Indeed, we have often observed how difficult it is for our foreign students to judge the socio-cultural backgrounds of their classmates in this new and unfamiliar environment. Unless clear visual clues are in evidence, such as particular dress codes or attitudinal cues, they become excessively hesitant with each other. Where Native Speakers (NSs) may judge other NSs through their ways of using language, whether by regional accent, use of syntax and grammar or a particular vocabulary, it is our experience that *learners* of English, even at an advanced level, cannot necessarily make similar judgements from aural, behavioural or culturally induced cues, especially in mixed groups. Modelling – or consciously but tacitly demonstrating – respectful communication between relative strangers, then, becomes a sensible way forward for the lecturer. When a lecturer is ‘modelling’ respectful

communication, he or she will consciously speak and behave in ways that create an emotionally safe atmosphere and that invite easy imitation (Csizér and Kormos 2009). If all goes well, students eventually adopt the friendly, diplomatic tones they are hearing. If things go poorly – if awkward clashes or silences occur – collegiality can be irretrievably lost.

But, of course, ‘modelling’ takes time. Modelling takes patience. Modelling does not yield immediately appreciable results. And, perhaps most daunting, modelling requires a high level of pro-activeness on the part of the lecturer. He or she must be aware that learners in the room are absorbing not only the message, but, in the famous words of Marshall McLuhan, the ‘massage’ (McLuhan 1967). If lecturers wish students to be, for instance, comfortable and confident in respectfully expressing moderately or highly controversial opinions in the classroom but, as teachers, sensibly wish to conceal their own opinions, they may maintain their own neutrality while offering positive reinforcement by pointedly praising those students who do respectfully express opinion. This praise, which might take the form of ‘Well put’ or ‘Cogently argued’, allows the lecturer to ordain the expressiveness without herself taking a position on the issue.

We have found this kind of immediate, positive teacher feedback very effective over a long period of time. We have seen our initially quieter, more reticent learners gradually overcome self-consciousness as they gain both linguistic ability and social confidence. What we find most encouraging about the effect of modelling in improving classroom dynamics is that it would appear to serve well even those cultural groups, such as the Chinese, who are not only initially reticent, but decidedly reticent.

When asked in our survey, does your cultural background influence or determine your attitude in classroom interaction, responses from our former Chinese students, who graduated with Degrees in International Business and English, suggested that they themselves were highly aware of their own culturally induced reticence but felt somewhat helpless, at least initially, to overcome it. They expressed this in statements such as: ‘I have a habit since primary school to accept inputs [sic] without questioning. Most of the time, I keep quiet’. Or: ‘Chinese students are generally shy in the classroom. We prefer to listen rather than to talk actively. However, when we are quiet, it does not mean that we are not listening to the lecturers’.

And again: 'Yes, I have been influenced by the Chinese culture and in the classroom rarely talk, raise hands, or ask questions.'

All three of these students indicate here that their quietness relates to the determining factors in their prior educational experience and that it is something which hinders their efforts to communicate orally in the classroom. One student further suggested a feeling of alienation relative to the common European mindset of the rest of the class: 'As a Chinese student, I often feel the distance between me and the European students. Also the distance between me and the lecturer is quite wide ... [compared to] the distance between the lecturer and other EU students.'

These responses clearly suggest that Chinese students in Ireland understand themselves as socially and academically different from their western classmates. They perceive that their own prior educational conditioning has rendered them unlikely to speak up, unlikely to question. They find it somewhat confusing, and perhaps unnerving, to be expected to contribute verbally to classroom proceedings, but they certainly do not wish their lecturers or classmates to conclude that they are not listening or paying attention.

In the mind of the conscientious lecturer, responses such as these raise the question of whether such clear cultural differences are to be respected and, in a certain practical sense, overlooked. Or ought studiously reticent learners to be just as studiously drawn out and, if so, how should this be done? Again, the answer would appear to lie in modelling. Modelling behaviour singles out no one and involves no reprimand. The lecturer adopts tones, vocabulary, mannerisms that she wishes her students to regard as appropriate for mixed conversation and she maintains these registers over time. Group members contribute, pose polite challenges to each other and enjoy themselves. Over time, culturally reticent students see that praise and pleasure come to those who speak. And eventually they too speak.¹

1 However, lecturers may find it helps, as well, to articulate clearly their expectations regarding classroom discussion and their rationale behind it. In her book *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students* (2009), Mary Reda discovers that university and college undergraduates do not automatically see the reasoning behind classroom discussion as pedagogy. She recommends throughout her book

Managing Classroom Conflict and Diversity

But, of course, once a multiplicity of voices is in play, conflict ensues and new classroom challenges arise. We use the term ‘challenges’ deliberately here, instead of the alternative term ‘problems’ because, quite surprisingly, very few students see conflict as negative. We as lecturers often experience conflict as problematic because, in the moment, it can certainly *feel* uncomfortable, even uncontrollable (never a welcome sensation when standing at the head of a classroom). But almost all of the past students whom we surveyed had positive things to say about conflict. When asked if they perceived conflict or disagreement in the classroom as positive or negative, all respondents replied that it was positive. One wrote: ‘in general, disagreement and conflict is something positive, since it is interesting to get to know different opinions and how they developed,’ and another was of the view that ‘all conflicts provide a person with an experience of dealing with people. The experience is a wealth.’ Both thus believe that through conflict we come to know others better.

A handful of respondents further suggested that conflict not only helps us to know other people better but also promotes understanding of the multiple aspects to particular issues. They wrote, for instance, ‘conflict is positive. If the disagreement is related to certain interesting topics, such disagreement can help me know the pros and cons and make me think [in a] broader [way]’ and ‘it depends, but generally it’s positive for me since it evokes more critical thinking and self-reflection’. So not only do compelling arguments get aired during conflict, but one’s own ability to discern between arguments is honed. Indeed, sometimes positive, measurable outcomes result from managed conflict, as was suggested by two further comments, ‘nothing would ever get resolved if people don’t say what they think,’ and ‘I learnt a lot about other cultures and I lost some stereotypes.’ One respondent offered a more nuanced view: ‘I regard [conflict] as positive,

that lecturers overtly explain to students that dialogue in the classroom helps to build meaning and enables all of us to learn from each other.

as far as you can have it under control and not take other peoples' points of view personally,' thus making it clear that for conflict to be pedagogically beneficial, it cannot be a free-for-all. Instead, the lecturer must act as a facilitator and participants must maintain their sense of humour and be prepared to think well of each other.

Clearly, and to our great satisfaction, our former students, now graduates and working in many sectors and in different countries, look back upon classroom debate as having been worthwhile. They see it, at least in retrospect, as having enhanced intercultural understanding by bringing classroom members up against different views and prompting a wider consideration of these views. The reference to 'an experience of dealing with people' followed by the description of this experience as 'a wealth' point to the welcome development of interpersonal skills as a direct result of classroom discussion in a multicultural setting. Significantly, though, the 'control' important to the last respondent indicates apprehension that offence may be caused if the lecturer fails to act as the poised arbiter of conversation.

Our view is supported by research carried out by Tseng which suggests that tension arising from attempts at successful communication between interlocutors from different cultures can have a positive effect on learning: 'uncertainty forces us to rethink our experience, and to search until we find answers, or generate new thoughts for solving what puzzles us about unfamiliar situations' (2002: 13). It seems our students appreciate that, while some moments in the classroom may have been frustrating, their efforts in securing communicative, transactional and intercultural competence have added to their competencies generally. By having been given the opportunity (within the relatively safe environment of the classroom) to consider other people's cultural understanding of topics and issues through the target language, our students have had to reconsider their own stances, explore different meanings, and actively marry their new perspectives to the language they have acquired.

But pleased as we are that our students believe they have gained from their experiences of classroom conflict, we know that absence makes the heart grow fonder. So we feel we need to consider – and as reflective practitioners, to *re*-consider – our ongoing approach to conflict in the classroom.

While our past students can reminisce positively about conflict, those of us still engaged in classroom dynamics may find ourselves feeling off-guard and even alarmed when there is a conflict – by which we mean any situation rife with defensiveness, raised voices, silenced voices or hurt feelings. One important measure in preparing for multi-cultural classroom conflict is to understand it as inevitable. Such understanding helps to alleviate the generalized anxiety that can take hold of participants, including the lecturer, when conflict arises. Understanding conflict not as solvable but as navigable helps to allay anxiety as well.

Sometimes what brings to light broad, culturally determined differences of interpretation and causes undesirable friction (or reticence) is either the classroom analysis of a text or else a group writing assignment. Some years ago, Ireland held a referendum on the legality of abortion in exceptional circumstances, specifically when the life of the mother was in danger. The city of Dublin was awash with ‘Vote Yes’ and ‘Vote No’ signs, the short texts of which were emotionally charged and sometimes inflammatory. Our first-year *Written Expression and Textual Analysis* class was, at the time, learning about persuasive writing strategies and the practice of negotiating contrasting points of view to arrive at a clearly articulated position. They were, in short, learning to make a formal written argument in English.

The abortion debate, because it was so topical, prompted classroom discussion and soon became an opportunity to demonstrate the well-established pre-writing strategy of brainstorming. But, as a group, we soon found ourselves sinking in the merciless quicksand of cultural condescension. The Chinese students could not grasp why the topic was controversial to begin with, abortion being both commonplace and entirely legal in China. The Italian students could not grasp the Chinese students’ incomprehension. The French students expected the Italian students to defend the strong religious sentiments (whether real or imagined) of other Italian students they had known. One Portuguese student nearly walked out. What nobody seemed able to do was to question the other point of view without causing offence. Innocent questions were misconstrued as judgemental. Judgemental questions were laced with intolerance. Clearly, our ‘Culture of International Learners’ had failed to evolve the sensitivity necessary to

conducting fluid communication. For what felt like an eternity in multicultural purgatory, our various worlds collided. The only thing that could save us was the end of the hour.

But if uncomfortable experiences such as this one have taught us anything over the years, it is that in this type of tense classroom situation, the deep, underlying moral or philosophical differences (such as those pertaining to abortion) are not the matters to be resolved. The matters to be resolved are, instead, the deceptively superficial differences in manner and temperament that prevent effective, civil communication. Indeed, tempting as it may be to try to resolve controversy, it is not the remit of the language teacher or lecturer to bring students to agreement, but to resolve their difficulties of communication. Our role, we believe, entails helping them to become competent, respectful communicators, by creating what Tseng (2002: 20) calls ‘... a teaching model that encourages teachers to use cultural differences as a source of productive tension’.

And that can be a challenging proposition, because as already indicated, culture clashes are complex and sometimes the nature of discord is not at all self-evident. If my sensibilities are at odds with your sensibilities, then we have a ‘clash.’ But whether that clash can be attributed to our cultural differences or our age differences or our gender differences or any other differences, is probably less important *in the moment* than the fact that we do have a clash. And, if we are sensitive, we will be able to nudge each other towards increased understanding and growth.

But distilling the message from the medium (i.e. the tone, the posture, the stance) is not something that comes easily to language learners. Aitchison (1994: 83) articulates the complex skills involved: ‘... in recognizing words, hearers’ guesses are aided by their knowledge of the language and by exploitation of the surrounding context’. She quotes research carried out by Rosch, who gave an early definition of the ‘prototype theory’ which ‘suggests that when humans group objects into categories, they set up a prototype – the most typical example. According to this view, concepts and words are inextricably linked and cannot be disentangled’ (Rosch 1975: 87). But in order for listeners to be able to reconstruct a message successfully, they have to be able to identify the audio cue correctly. As Aitchison notes, different people from different cultures may choose

different prototype images (such as, for example, when our French students in the scenario above appeared to expect religiosity from their Italian classmates), and again, context and expectations play a large part in any one person's understanding of utterance. Since words can have multiple meanings, they may result in different interpretations and, indeed, the generation of new prototypes. Understanding is closely related to the interlocutors' language processing skills, yet the skills that a NS uses in order to decode incoming signals are not necessarily available to Non-native Speakers (NNSs). Not only is NNS understanding hampered by a lack of exposure to context and authentic material, it has also been suggested that NNSs use different processing skills from NSs. Wilson (1994) points out that listeners (NS listeners) seem to have an intuitive ability to distinguish the intended contextual assumptions and disregard any other options. Without appropriate training and prolonged exposure to a society, its culture(s) and its language, the NNS is unlikely to have the particular inferencing skills needed to construct context from an unclear message. Wardhaugh (1993) claims that the most salient item in intelligibility and understanding of speech lies in the attention and the interpretation processes, which he suggests are skills that humans acquire on the basis of experience. It has been demonstrated that the context in which NSs hear words is essential to intelligibility. However, it seems that it is precisely this economic use of processing skills which seems elusive to the NNS listener. But in NNS to NNS communication the issues surrounding language processing may in fact be less problematic than those where a native speaker is involved. Meierkord (1998) suggests that NNSs are creators of a separate language and states that they: '... establish a special variety of English, which is effective in informal conversations ... Due to their cooperative behaviour, speakers manage to communicate successfully despite their restricted linguistic means' (*Erfurt Electronic Studies in English*, website).

In the absence of refined inferencing skills, then, what learners in an intercultural environment need to practice are their verbal stances. They need to learn to be disarming. When a lecturer detects a strident, or shrill, or accusatory tone emerging from a participant, it is important to defuse the situation, for instance, by a quieting hand gesture, thereby reminding those in attendance that affability is in order. But on no account, we feel,

should the lecturer seek to *resolve* the issue, their role is rather to facilitate the discussion. The lecturer's aim should be to create a calm and neutral space in which tolerance and difference are possible. Barring a very small minority, our past students agree. They regard the lecturer as a kind of peace keeper, someone who, to quote one respondent, should not allow discussion to go 'too far' or to become 'too personal'. When asked if the lecturer should resolve verbal conflict between students when it arises from classroom discussion and, if so, how, in their view, this should be done, representative responses included:

The lecturer could here function as a kind of mediator, asking the conflict partners how they mean what they say and thereby the lecturer could stress similarities among the parties rather than insisting on differences. I think as soon as the conflict parties realise that they share certain attitudes, opinions, etc., it is easier to resolve the conflict among them.

This response is striking in that it makes a pedagogical suggestion: namely that the lecturer ought to locate the similarities in the opposing stances so that, at least momentarily, participants can take a breath, regain composure and perhaps recover some pride if any has been lost. If the discussion topic were to become heated around, for example, privatization of public services, with one student arguing that free market competition leads to the best services and another arguing that only government regulation can prevent exploitation, the lecturer might comment that, interestingly, both positions have effective delivery as their aim. This sort of neutralizing remark 'stresses similarities,' as suggested by the survey respondent above and goes a long way to uncovering common ground – always the most fertile kind for fruitful debate.

A further comment envisages the role of the lecturer in the following way: 'I think a lecturer should intervene by analysing both aspects of the arguments (pros and cons of each opinion). This might help students to become quiet'. This respondent thus offers slightly different advice by suggesting the lecturer *ought* to engage in the debate but not take sides. This writer sees the ideal lecturer as possessing the critical distance necessary to stand above the fray and, perhaps, summarize the several sides to a debate, so that the participants themselves can further intellectualize. In

this way students may be helped to ‘become quiet’. We take this ‘quiet’ to mean not only the momentary aural silence and the more subdued voices of the room but also a much desired inner quietness that allows students to feel safe. Unless all participants feel safety from judgement, the discussion itself has become inappropriate. Many students will worry about the judgement of their classmates, and many will also worry about the judgement of the lecturer who, to varying degrees, will be understood as Authority. So the lecturer must be extremely careful to discern between arguments and to encourage participants themselves to discern between arguments but not to judge them. Discernment and judgement, in this regard, are not synonyms: the first involves locating parameters and the second involves moral evaluation. A safe and quiet space cannot come about in the presence of moral evaluation.

Another respondent wrote:

I think lecturers should show they understand each point of view and maybe make each of them understand that there is a cultural background behind each opinion because of socialisation. Listen before judging. Explain that it is normal that there are different opinions and it is good for everyone to understand the opposite opinion to maybe learn from it or to ... find [better] counter arguments to it.

The reference here to the cultural background behind each opinion is, we feel, useful but only insofar as lecturers might remind students from time to time that ethnic, regional, and cultural backgrounds may account to some extent for people’s points of view. Lecturers ought not, we believe, to attempt to explain someone’s opinion by reference to his or her culture. To do so would be unnecessarily reductive and possibly biased. The lecturer might instead more neutrally suggest that multicultural groupings such as ours allow for the broadening of horizons. If students themselves wish to account for their positions by reference to their own cultural backgrounds, that is, of course, perfectly valid and may give rise to further discussion.

One respondent recognized that lecturers are likely to have evolving views of their own and even that these views may sometimes be unduly tendentious, a reason for them not to attempt to resolve conflict:

a lecturer should not resolve conflict because what if the lecturer is also confused about the issue? He or she may also be biased. I think the most important role of the lecturer is to guide the students to think, to understand, and to respect. The students should be required to put forward reasonable and substantiated opinions in the class. We should agree to disagree.

This comment rightly suggests that the lecturer must understand the limitations of her role (to act as referee) and the limitations of her own subjectivity (potential personal confusion). The lecturer is not expected to pontificate on the matter under discussion and this, we feel, is classroom debate as it should be. Such feedback serves to remind us of the unavoidable leadership dimension to the lecturer role. Most lecturers and instructors in third-level education are likely to have found themselves in the position of orienting their students away from conversational muddle, at the very least, and from heated arguments on occasion. But it is precisely because some students tend to place high value on the moral authority of their lecturers that lecturers should refrain from moral pronouncements as distinct from corrections of matters of fact. When all eyes are upon the lecturer to proclaim Student A the winner and Student B the loser, a composed, confident, lecturer need only remind the group that her own role is to remain 'neutral', support the rules of engagement and encourage mutual respect within the group. If a group of learners has cultivated an environment of trust, good-natured humour is also an approach that will almost always go a long way to un-ruffling ruffled feathers.

But of course, not every conflict arises from a *moral* dilemma. We have discovered that a culture clash can arrive at the most unexpected times and for entirely unexpected reasons. In one of our modules² called *Cultural Translation*, students use material from both host and home cultures to analyse cultural signifiers and share intercultural understandings related to nation and place as part of an introduction to discourse analysis. During a classroom exchange, while examining advertisements and newspaper articles from our respective countries, we once had a misunderstanding arise from a broad generalization. A Lithuanian student said point blank to a

2 A module represents a course unit on a particular area within an overall programme.

Chinese student, 'why is everyone in China so superstitious?' The Chinese student took on the quiet demeanour of one who had been insulted, and she eschewed the question entirely. The restoration of goodwill and collegiality became, once again, the responsibility of the lecturer (in whose mind the question could as easily have come from one of the German students and have fitted the stereotype of 'the logical German'). But the problem was not one of Chinese versus Lithuanian, rather of Chinese versus the Other. Perhaps there *is* a streak of superstition in the Chinese character (we are not in a position to say) but the clash arises from the implicit 'judgement.' The Lithuanian student's tone was not inquisitive or gentle and, perhaps worse, it worked from a generalization, 'everyone.' She might instead have asked, 'in your experience, is the average Chinese person more superstitious than the average person here in Dublin?' Such phrasing would have arisen from a stance of respectful inquisitiveness, rather than knee-jerk generalization.

Painfully awkward moments such as this one have led us to establish a kind of Benefit of the Doubt Policy with our incoming cohort of foreign and international students. We first speak openly with them about our experiences of working in multicultural classes with learners who may or may not have preconceived notions about each other but who are certainly in various stages of 'un-knowledge' about one another. Unlike our School's Irish learners of foreign languages, our foreign learners of English lack a common native language, not to speak of common experiences of education, upbringing or socialization. And so we ask them to maintain a mentality of pre-forgiveness: if they find they feel hurt or insulted in any one classroom session, they are, for the time being, to presume an innocence, or at least an ignorance, on the part of 'the other.' Even though not every group of students eventually achieves superb classroom chemistry, we do find that trust has time to grow when the initial classroom ethos is one of articulated, non-judgemental empathy.

Active Listening and Judicious Intervention

If the ideal speech situation is one in which all interlocutors are on equal footing and have equal opportunities and abilities to share in the communication, it seems to follow that a speech event between learners of English, as well as a lecturer, from a variety of cultural and educational backgrounds is, in many ways, not an ideal situation. Shared and mutual understanding in such circumstances is far from given. The information needed for full comprehension of what is being said is often gleaned from many other sources and reciprocal understanding can only come about if the listeners, of whom the lecturer is one, are actively involved in the communication (Grice 1975; Habermas 1979; Brown 1990). Active listening, then, must be high on the list of language teaching priorities both for lecturers and their students as the following example illustrates.

Not long ago, again in the module *Cultural Translation*, two native speakers of Spanish found themselves arguing over the role of bullfighting in Spanish society. As a group, we examined an advertisement for olive oil featuring a matador and a red cape. The student presenting the advertisement asserted that bullfighters are respected in Spanish society as fearless, powerful men who must stay in peak health. High grade olive oil, she explained, was being promoted by the advertisement as essential to physical fitness. When she was asked by a fellow student what sort of people in Spain went to see the spectacle of a brutal sport in which the bull is killed, she suggested that mainly socially conservative Spaniards lacking education and from the south of the country comprised the audience of most bull-fighting arenas. She herself was from northern Spain and had never attended a bullfight. One of her classmates, also Spanish, took offence and rather angrily declared that she had been to numerous bullfights with her family and that she was neither conservative nor poorly educated. She lapsed into Spanish, as did our presenter, and their disagreement swiftly escalated. Had it not been for a disarming joke made by the lecturer that 'the guys in the room might enjoy a girl-fight even more than a bullfight', conflict might have continued and resulted in feelings of shame or regret.

Enabling Communication between Non-native Speakers

If a culture clash such as this can occur between native speakers of the same language but from different regions, it is obvious that much more complex misunderstandings can arise between non-native speakers. Native speakers can use listening repair systems as an essential part of smooth conversation. They can call upon whatever common cultural understandings they do share, as well as their relatively similar commands of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Non-native speakers, however, must often repeat utterances and work hard to avoid vagueness. Krauss and Fussell (1991: 9), for example, found that where messages were poorly understood, this ‘... probably resulted from speakers’ miscalculation of the common ground that existed between themselves and their addressees’. Brown (1990) acknowledges the discrepancy between the acquisition of shared knowledge between NSs and NNSs when she explains that the NS’s deictic centres (referring to form, context, and culture) take a lifetime to develop through exposure, education, and practice. NNSs can presumably be taught part of this knowledge and, with time, a good deal of context information arrives through further vocabulary acquisition, listening practice, speaking practice and writing practice. But Kecskes and Papp have observed a distinct difference in the way a foreign language is processed depending on whether the language was acquired as part of scholarly development (that is, in a classroom setting) or whether the acquisition of a non-native language occurred during adaptation to a different country and culture, as a second language. They describe this difference as a dichotomy and say that it is: ‘the result of the accessibility of the socio-cultural background of the target language that is responsible for the underlying cognitive mechanisms of language production’ (2000: 13–14).

It would seem, then, that the contextual and cultural information present in the deictic centres of context and culture is not accessible to foreign language learners through classroom practice alone. Communication between a NS and a NNS, or between NNSs, without the usual shared knowledge that can be expected from two NSs communicating, is, therefore,

bound to need more elaborate explanation, clarification and repetition, as well as being more susceptible to misinterpretation.

The implication for lecturers who find themselves in such situations (that is whose learners have not yet substantially progressed to the deictic centres of context and culture) is to acknowledge that they are dealing with a set of learning parameters that are at once complex and interwoven. Lecturers and teachers of multi-cultural groups need to be aware that the ability to use appropriate language is markedly different from the ability to use lexically, syntactically and grammatically 'correct' language. Sophisticated manipulation of register and full command of etiquette, like the ability to tell jokes in the target language, are skills that typically are not learnt but absorbed in the process of living within a certain social community, as findings from research by writers such as Garfinkel (1967), Bremer et al. (1993) and Forrester (1996), for example, have shown. Social and cultural skills, which are embedded in the language being learned, often do not get priority in English language classes.

So one further remit for lecturers who operate *in* the target culture might be to ensure a smooth transition from First, to Second, to, as Kramsch (2009: 233) calls it, a 'Third Culture', in other words the culture of the classroom or what we have earlier termed a Culture of International Learners. This transition would involve some verbal sharing of what the students' respective individual First Cultures entail and, secondly, would involve instilling an awareness of appropriate register in the target language. As the structures and uses of any language inevitably reflect the cultural values of the society in which that language is spoken, it seems imperative that language learners acquire appropriate social and linguistic behaviour inherent in the target culture.

If one considers Kecskes and Papp's premise (discussed above) that the accessibility of the socio-cultural background of the target language is central to the underlying cognitive mechanism of language production, it would follow that our students (who are living in the target culture) are at an advantage in processing the target language and internalizing their Second (Irish) Culture. Certainly our students, who enter our courses with a minimum requirement of Upper-intermediate English (a 6.0 on the IELTS – International English Language Testing System – or equivalent), would

consider themselves as having adequate skills to be able to communicate their feelings in the target language. So we were not surprised when 79 per cent of our surveyed students said that yes, 'my vocabulary in English is usually adequate to the task of participating in classroom discussion.' Nor were we surprised when 91 per cent agreed that 'my vocabulary in English enables me to avoid misunderstandings outside of the classroom' or when 87 per cent answered 'yes' to: 'I am able to interpret stress and intonation when I am listening to English.' However, given the students' apparent optimistic judgement of their own inferencing skills in the target language in the previous questions, a surprisingly high 54 per cent per cent answered 'yes' to: 'I find it challenging to judge communicative and attitudinal clues in English.'

What emerges, then, from these findings is that, while students with high levels of English feel they have adequate skills to understand and communicate effectively in English, they acknowledge that it is a quite different matter to be able to evaluate nuances in English that communicate an interlocutor's personal feelings and stances. From our survey, it seems that just over half of the students who participated do not consider interpreting attitudinal cues as a language skill which they have acquired. The gap between advanced language skills and the ability to interpret an interlocutor's personal stance arises mainly for students who do not seem to have mastered what Scarino (2009: 68–69) calls intercultural language learning, that is language learning that '... engages with the process of understanding and interpreting human communication and interaction – not only with observation, description, analysis and interpretation of phenomena shared when communicating and interacting, but also with active engagement in interpreting self (INTRA-culturality) and "other" (INTER-culturality) in diverse contexts of social and cultural exchange'.

Observations such as this may be explained by the fact that language is not necessarily used to mean unambiguously what it expresses. Multiple expressive alternatives, for example, the use of rhetorical devices such as irony and sarcasm, discount the influence of the prosodic features of spoken language such as intonation and have the power to confer added meaning to an utterance. NNS may not necessarily be able to avail themselves of the required socio-culturally specific information or, depending on the

language learner's level of proficiency, may not yet have the skills to interpret contextual cues and grasp ambiguous meaning in vocabulary.

Thus, learners of English at all levels need not only to be able to process the functionality and meaning of the lexical items used in speech (or writing) but have also to be aware of the socio-cultural context in which words occur. As O'Sullivan (2007: 48–49) argues: 'propriety in one language community can be deemed improper in another language community' and 'language learners should understand that appropriate polite communicative competence is an inseparable and integral part of social linguistic convention'. Bremer et al. (1993: 158–159) had previously found that conceptual fluency, defined as 'close-to-native use and comprehension of concepts of the target language', is often not taught or known to learners of English and they are subsequently unaware of the interpretative differences between their own L1 and the L2. Much contextual information is further conveyed by prosody, rhythm, stress and intonation of speech in the English language and, as indicated, for instance, by Bremer et al. (1993: 182), prosodic skills can be especially difficult to master for Asian speakers of English, whose L1 is a tonal language. Difficulties with prosody combined with the issue of 'face' may mean that it will be very difficult for the Chinese learner of English to ask for clarification, thus jeopardizing successful, subtle communication.

While it is important for lecturers to help students understand that there are culturally bound norms as regards the use of register and forms of politeness, it is crucial for the dynamics of the group that such skills are introduced in a non-judgemental manner, ensuring that the target culture (hardly monolithic anyway) is not presented as holding value or privilege over the students' own cultures and identities. As we have already seen, students stress the importance of the lecturer adopting a non-judgemental approach. And even as lecturers smooth the way for learners to accommodate into the target culture and, indeed, to *accommodate* the target culture, they must simultaneously cultivate a space where the learners' differing cultures and their own can combine to form a new intra-culture, in other words, what has already been referred to as a Culture of International Learners, a space characterized by Oldenburg (1991: 16) as being 'inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration

of it' – or, as we have suggested earlier, a space where we cease to typecast and begin to understand each other as individuals.

Evidence of the existence of such an intra-culture in our own classroom can be found in a comment of one of our students in the survey: '... before I could not handle these situations, but ... being aware of cultural differences made me react differently: putting myself in someone else's shoes and approaching the debate differently, in a cooler and more understanding way. I will still disagree, but [I will] explain it better.' This student's observation shows that, while it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with someone, it is essential to apply the appropriate socio- and inter-cultural behavioural and linguistic registers.

For our own part, we are pleased (which is not to say entirely satisfied) that 78 per cent of our past students report that they did not feel excluded or isolated from their peers in our English classes. It is, after all, no easy task for teachers and lecturers to help students in multicultural classrooms to use linguistic competence to achieve true communicative competence. As with all human relationships worth pursuing, conflict is inevitable. It is inevitable, but, it is also, as we have suggested, never comfortable. The will and the skill to negotiate conflict are, of course, what gets one through.

Once NNSs are facilitated in re-acquiring the communicative skills that they more naturally possess in their L₁ (such as inferencing, repairing misunderstood cues from context) into their L₂, the journey to becoming accepted as equal interlocutors in NS to NNS communication may be less long. Learners of any language have to cross the divide between being a user and an analyser of the target language, becoming aware of the embedded cultural values in a language, as well as juxtaposing these new values with their own cultural identity and its inherent norms and values.

Conclusion

Teachers and lecturers of English and, no doubt, of other disciplines as well, will be best placed to assist learners in multicultural settings if they, firstly, anticipate – indeed, take for granted – an unspecified undertow of cultural conflict. It is also important that they should understand that theirs is not to reason why, in terms of resolving conflict, but only to help their learners to reason why – civilly, competently, out loud and with respect. Modelling diplomatic communication is crucial. Articulating a policy of sensitivity, such as a Benefit of the Doubt policy, is also useful. And, lastly, practising active listening with learners, whereby they are encouraged to ‘tune in’ to the underlying approaches inherent in much cross-cultural communication, will, we believe, yield both sense ... and sensitivity.

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